What can be changed need not be endured. Human suffering is not a fate to be borne, but a challenge to be overcome…Passover kept hope alive. Hope kept the Jewish people alive. **Rabbi Sacks**

October 13th **The Shofar** Faith and Hope reign

Where were you God when we needed you?

The unambiguously moral evil perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023, coincided with Simchat Torah celebrations (Simchat Torah is Hebrew for "the joy of Torah" and refers to a celebration, often accompanied by dancing and singing, marking the completion of the annual reading of this section of the Bible) and Purim, commemorating the victory of the Hebrew people over the Persian king in the 4th century BC. It is, essentially, the story of the Book of Esther. But these days of celebration now become a day of infamy. An abomination when hundreds of women were gang-raped, babies burned alive, and innocents slaughtered and brutalised even as they lay dying.

Coming face to face with that kind of evil, even the most faithful of Jews is going to end up asking: What was God doing as the residents of Beeri were being burned alive? Why was the Almighty passive as Shani Louk was paraded unconscious and naked — savage Hamas supporters abusing her body — and then decapitated? Was God watching? Did He see? Why did He not intervene?

Why do the faithful suffer?

Why does a God who has watched so much Jewish suffering for so many millennia and yet done nothing, deserve to be praised? Does He deserve our prayers? Does He deserve our thanks? For what? The truly faithful may remind us of the reading at Passover: *In every generation our enemies seek to annihilate us. But the Almighty saves us from their hands.* It is a strange form of salvation. The question remains: why does He let them seek to kill us in the first place? Does He let the Spanish face imminent annihilation only to rescue them? Do the Australians, or the Thai, or the French face the same fate? What is going on?

God is supposed to be our protector. And yet when tragedy strikes, our first impulse is often to defend God rather than rant and thunder against the injustice of it all. We Christians are conditioned to it but not the Jewish faithful. Their reflections move off into a very different direction, one highlighted by their prophets

They look heavenward and wonder why God is silent and seemingly absent in the face of so much suffering, that is the enduring question of October 7th. Those victims were all innocent. Their only crime was to be born a Jew. And does God not promise to protect the innocent? *The*

Lord will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul" (**Psalm 121**). The babies who were murdered were so innocent. Does God not promise to guard the defenceless? The Lord is the keeper of little ones: I was humbled, and he delivered me (**Psalm 116:6**). *These children deserved long lives*. Does God not promise to safeguard humanity*? I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings* (**Psalms 61:4**).

A Jewish perspective on suffering

We Christians do not understand the Jewish approach to God or appreciate how these questions are very much a part of the dynamic of Judaism. That religion encourages defiant man of faith, the man or woman who, like our patriarch Jacob, fights with angels and heavenly beings and defeats them. That in fact is the exact definition of the word Israel from **Genesis 32**: *Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome*. A Jew is a child of Abraham, our father in faith who went so far as to accuse God of injustice when the Almighty sought the destruction of both the righteous and the wicked in Sodom and Gomorrah. Jews are also disciples of Moses, who confronted God and demanded that his name be taken out of God's holy Torah if the Creator was going to proceed with His stated intention of wiping out the Jewish nation after the sin of the Golden Calf.

The Jewish believers are akin to King David, who declares in Psalms, *I shall not die for I shall live*, and because of this the Jewish nation has achieved immortality through an impudent insubordination in the face of having **to live** a fullness of life in a world that at times appears to be hellbent on wiping out their very existence from human history. Because of their faith they dare to defy fate, establish a courageous destiny, and in all things stand up and challenge God in the face of seeming divine miscarriages of justice.

What does God expect of us?

In so many powerful ways they remind us that our role in life as men and women of faith is never to sit around quietly offering empty platitudes about how innocent children are in heaven. How they are better off. For the children of Abraham that would appear to be one of the stupidest, most insensitive things imaginable. A child's place is not sitting around the throne of God in heaven, it is being tucked into an earthly bed by his or her parents.

Judaism teaches us that the role of religion is not to make us complacent or compliant. Rather, faith

galvanizes us to make the world a better place. That means fighting evil and protecting life. It means building hospitals and developing medicines. And it also means demanding of God that He reveals Himself in history and help us to make the world a safer, healthier, less dangerous place. We cannot do that on our own, though it will demand of us a wholehearted commitment to divine collaboration.

Challenging God in the face of suffering is not blasphemous. Rather, it is the ultimate sign of faith. It means we believe that God controls the world, controls human fate, controls the world's destiny, and has it in His unlimited power to make the world a happier place.

Nowhere in Judaism do we find people looking for ways of letting God off the hook. In the face of tragedy, they would be most likely to pray,

> *Lord, we, your servants, are decent people. We deserve better than to have 1,200 people murdered, another 150 hostages in hell, and scores of young soldiers dying every day just to keep Israel from annihilation. In the name of all that is righteous we implore You, we demand of You, to protect our children, Your children, from harm, so that all the peoples of the world will see Your great hand in history and how the innocent are allowed to flourish, prosper, and* grow *old with children of their own.*

One of the more mystifying events of the Bible involves God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. What was God thinking? It is one of the more challenging narratives of the Bible and a recent commentary I read says the key to understanding it is to see Isaac not as an individual but as the Jewish religion. Who was Isaac? He was Judaism. He was the inheritor of Abraham's convictions. He was the person who would continue Abraham's belief system. Were Isaac to be slaughtered, everything Abraham had taught in terms of the rejection of paganism, the belief in one God, and all monotheistic tenets would be lost. Therein lies our own challenge.

The test, therefore, was this: Would Abraham follow God's commandment to kill off his religion, or would he put his religion before God's will? What really mattered to Abraham? God or Judaism? And if these facets of faith were put in conflict, which would Abraham choose? Thus, the religious fanatic is the person who has ceased to serve God and has instead begun to worship a particular religion, making faith into an idol rather than the basis for a relationship with our Creator. It is in this light that we can understand how Islamic fundamentalists can be prepared to violate God's express commandment against murder to strike a blow for the glory not of their deity, but of Islam. It is the hurtful face of religious tyranny.

Faith is a vocation to a life of action

People who are in a relationship with God are humble and do their utmost to refrain from judging others. Their experience of God's compassion leads them to be merciful and loving. Our intimate relationship with the God who is without sin should remind us of our inbuilt human fallibility.

But what happens when those who arrogantly worship religion successfully advance the cause that their religion is more important than life itself? How do the humble and devout hold steadfast to our faith when the pain and anguish of such zealots devastates all that we as a nation – and as human beings – hold dear? How do we continue to pray to the God of our forefathers when, at times of great and unwarranted suffering, God does not act as he did in the sparing of Isaac but rather appears to do nothing to intervene?

Is this not among the most asked and most unanswerable questions of our time – and of all time? How do we believe in God with full faith? How do we worship and serve Him with an open heart, when, in our experience, God appears to willingly tolerate the suffering of His innocent creations the world over? This is the language of Jeremiah.

So many of us are searching for a reason why people suffer. We want to redeem tragedy by giving it meaning. Suffering ennobles the spirit, we say. It makes us more mature. It helps us focus on what's important in life.

The truth for Judaism is that suffering has no purpose, no redeeming qualities, and any attempts to imbue it with rich significance are deeply misguided. The more we explain suffering, the more sanctuary we grant it in our lives. The less we accept it, the more we combat it. For the Hebrew Bible, suffering is not redemptive, it is not ennobling, it is not a blessing, and it teaches us nothing, absolutely nothing, that we could not have learned by gentler means. The appropriate response to death is always life. And the Jewish response to suffering is to demand that God put an end to it.